

A Call to Conscience on the 90th Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., January 15, 2019

Today, as we remember Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we watch in anguish as many achievements toward a more just and equal society we believed were secure are being eviscerated in front of our eyes.

In this hour of constitutional crisis and moral emergency, do we wish to truthfully honor Dr. King's life and further his legacy?

If we wish to honor Dr. King, we must shake the foundations of our grotesquely unequal social and economic order. "We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values," he warned us. "We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

In association with the Gandhi King Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice, we have come together as an intergenerational group of women and men who care deeply about the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Some of us are surviving members of Dr. King's team of advisors, deputies, associates; we marched with him, knelt in prayer with him, went to jail together. Some of us worked primarily with Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference; others were among the leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Some of us are historians and scholars of the black freedom movement. Some of us are college students. Many of us work to protect and secure voting rights, and Constitutional rights to a decent education, for all Americans. Some of us lead organizations fighting mass incarceration, gun violence, industrial pollution, and climate change. We come from diverse communities of faith, and we include a number of Baptist and Pentecostal ministers, a Jesuit priest, an American-Muslim community leader, a Conservative rabbi, and a professor of Jewish Studies.

Dr. King's mission was "to redeem the soul of America." His life's work was to hold fast to the Spirit of the Lord and attend to the needs of "the least of these" -- to help feed the hungry, provide shelter to the homeless, release the captives, free the oppressed, and to follow the Lord's commandment to have no other gods before Me. Thus, Dr. King decried the blasphemy and idolatry of Americans who had increasingly come to worship "the false god of nationalism," a religion that "affirms that each nation is an absolute sovereign unit acknowledging no control, save its own independent will." He warned us against the prophets and preachers of this false religion, specifically "the advocates of white supremacy, and the America First movements."

To his Christian brothers and sisters, he declared: “One cannot worship this false god of nationalism and the God of Christianity at the same time. The two are incompatible...”

Today we face the gravest danger to democracy and rule of law since 1877, when federal troops withdrew from the former Confederate states, crushing the hopes of former slaves that Reconstruction would bring them equal rights as promised under the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments. We believe that the threat of civil unrest and violence is higher today than at any time since the riots and uprisings that followed Dr. King’s assassination more than fifty years ago. If we do not pull our nation back from the brink, find ways to confirm our common humanity in all interactions and communications, and unite in the common struggle to defend the core principles of our democracy, we are at risk of moral, social and national collapse.

With a fierce dedication to nonviolent struggle, we affirm the bonds of friendship and fellowship across generations. We affirm our spiritual lineage with the American movements for civil rights, voting rights, housing rights and economic justice, and the global movements to achieve nuclear disarmament and to end the Vietnam War, in which Dr. King was a leading figure.

It is not possible to recreate the social justice and peace movements of the 1960s to which many of us were dedicated; nor would that be the right path even if we could. We must build a *new* moral fusion movement on a mass scale by joining together in a nonviolent army for justice and peace, through solidarity with hundreds of magnificent civil rights, human rights and peace organizations and hundreds of thousands of community leaders and grassroots activists across the country.

We dedicate ourselves to this struggle to realize the promise of American democracy on behalf of all of us who live here -- *We the People* -- documented and undocumented. And even this is not enough. We must cool a world on fire, and save the planet from destruction, on behalf of our children’s children and their progeny into the future.

Nonviolence is the heart and soul of our movement because we are united in a struggle against violence in all of its forms. Racism, poverty and militarism in all of its forms are violence against the human body and the human spirit. We will not stop until we eradicate the systemic violence inflicted on our brothers and sisters, and all of us, by white supremacy, and the legacy of chattel slavery; sexism and gender discrimination in all forms; the proliferation of guns and opioids into our communities; mass incarceration and militarism at home and abroad; hunger and homelessness in the cities and rural areas of America and

throughout the world; environmental degradation and the urgent threat of catastrophic climate change.

Are we still able to hear Dr. King's trumpet of conscience? Do we have the collective will to reset the course of our society to realize his vision of the Beloved Community?

We have a choice today, and it is the same choice Dr. King identified before his death: "The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence." The existential choice before us has become more urgent today than at any time in our lives since our beloved friend and pastor was assassinated more than fifty years ago.

We cannot repair America and the world with hate, only with love.

List of signatories

Civil rights movement leaders and historians

Joan Baez, activist and singer.

Taylor Branch, author of *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*.

Minnijean Brown-Trickey, member of the Little Rock Nine and activist for minority rights.

Clayborne Carson, Founder and Director, Martin Luther King, Jr., Research Institute; Editor of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers, and Professor of History, Stanford University.

Rev. Dr. Gerald L. Durley, Chair, Board of Directors, Interfaith Power and Light; Pastor Emeritus Providence Missionary Baptist Church.

Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President Emerita of the Children's Defense Fund.

Peter B. Edelman, Carmack Waterhouse Professor of Law and Public Policy and Faculty Director, Center on Poverty and Inequality, at Georgetown University Law Center.

Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr., Founder and President of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition.

John "J.T." Johnson, Project Director - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Ground Crew.

Clarence B. Jones, President, Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder, The Gandhi King Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice, University of San Francisco.

Rev. Dr. Bernard Lafayette, National Board Chairman, Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Janet Moses, M.D.

Robert (Bob) Moses, President, The Algebra Project.

Rev. Dr. C. T. Vivian, President Emeritus, Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Senator Harris Wofford, Special Assistant to President John F. Kennedy for Civil Rights, participant in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march, and U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania.

Ambassador Andrew Young, Jr., pastor, diplomat, U.S. Congressman, Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, Executive Director, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Current social justice activists, clergy and scholars

Alyse Bertenthal, Postdoctoral scholar.

Daniel Blackman, Humanitarian.

May Boeve, Executive Director, 350.org.

Eva Borgwardt, President, J Street U National Student Board and Stanford University student.

Rabbi Sharon Brous, Senior/ Founding Rabbi of IKAR.

LaTosha Brown, Co-Founder, Black Voters Matter Fund.

Natalia Cardona, Justice and Equity Manager, 350.org.

Rev. Paul Fitzgerald, President, University of San Francisco.

David Goodman, Civil Engineer, President of the Andrew Goodman Foundation.

Jonathan D. Greenberg, Executive Director and Co-Founder, The Gandhi King Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice, University of San Francisco.

Usjid Umar Hameed, Public Affairs Coordinator for the Council on American-Islamic Relations Columbus, Ohio; Puffin Democracy Fellow, The Andrew Goodman Foundation.

Lindsay Harper, Executive Director, Georgia WAND Education Fund, Inc.

Susannah Heschel, Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies, Dartmouth College.

Louis Arnold Leonidas Jr., Leadership Development Programme Fellow, The Global Education & Leadership Foundation (tGELF).

Grande Lum, Provost, Menlo College; former Director, Community Relations Service, U.S. Department of Justice.

Clifton Kinnie, Ferguson protester and Howard University student.

Rev. Ben McBride, Founder, The Empower Initiative and Co-Director, PICO California.

Pastor Michael McBride, National Director, Faith in Action's Urban Strategies and Live Free Campaign.

Maisha Moses, Executive Director, Young People's Project.

Zachary Norris, Executive Director, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.

Ai-jen Poo, Director, National Domestic Workers Alliance and Co-Director, Caring Across Generations.

Valencia Richardson, Georgetown Law student and Puffin Democracy Fellow for the Andrew Goodman Foundation.

Margaret Russell, Professor, Santa Clara University School of Law.

Lateefah Simon, President, Akonadi Foundation.

Andrea McEvoy Spero, Professor, University of San Francisco.

Daniela A. Tagtachian, Attorney, Lecturer, and Mysun Foundation Fellow at the University of Miami School of Law Environmental Justice Clinic.

The Reverend Raphael B. Warnock, Ph.D., Senior Pastor, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia.

Stephen Zunes, Professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco.